

# Film: 'Annie Hall,' Allen at His Best

By VINCENT CANBY

## Somber Comedy

**A**LVEY SINGER (Woody Allen) stands in front of an orangey sort of backdrop and tells us, the movie audience, the joke about two women at a Catskill resort. "The food," says the first woman, "is terrible." "Yes," the second woman agrees, "and the portions are so small."

This, says Alvy Singer, is just about the way he feels about life. It's not great—in fact, it's pretty evenly divided between the horrible and the miserable—but as long as it's there, he wants more.

In this fashion, Woody Allen introduces us to the particular concerns of his fine new film, "Annie Hall," a comedy about urban love and incompatibility that finally establishes Woody as one of our most audacious film makers, as well as the only American film maker who is able to work seriously in the comic mode without being the least bit ponderous.

Because Mr. Allen has his roots as a writer of one-liners and was bred in television and nightclubs, standing up, it's taken us quite a while to recognize just how prodigiously talented he is, and how different he has always been from those colleagues who also make their livings as he once did, racing from Las Vegas to the Coast to Tahoe to San Juan, then back to Las Vegas. Among other things, he's the first major American film maker ever to come out of a saloon.

For all of Mr. Allen's growth as a writer, director and actor, "Annie Hall" is not terribly far removed from "Take the Money and Run," his first work as a triple-threat man, which is not to put down the new movie but to upgrade the earlier one. "Take the Money and Run" was a visualized nightclub monologue, as freely associated as an analyst's introspections on the couch.

This also is more or less the form of "Annie Hall," Alvy Singer's free-wheeling, self-deprecating, funny and sorrowful search for the truth about his on-again, off-again affair with a beautiful young woman who is as emotionally bent as he is. The form of the two films is similar, but where the first was essentially a cartoon, "Annie Hall" has the humane sensibility of comedy.

It is, essentially, Woody's "Scenes From a Marriage," though there is no marriage, only an intense affair to which Alvy Singer never commits himself enough to allow Annie Hall (Diane Keaton) to give up her apartment and move in with him. Just why, we aren't told, though we can make guesses on the basis of the information furnished.

Alvy, who grew up as a poor Jewish boy in Brooklyn in a house under a Coney Island rollercoaster, is chronically suspicious and depressed. It may have started when he was 9 and first read about the expanding universe. What kind faith can you have if you know that in a couple of billion years everything's going to fly apart? With the firm conviction that the scheme is rotten, Alvy becomes a hugely successful television comedian somewhat on the scale of—you can guess Woody Allen.

Annie Hall is no less ambitious and mixed up, but for other reasons that, we must assume, have to do with the kind of WASPy, Middle Western household where Mom and Dad tend guilts as if they were prize delphiniums.

**ANNIE HALL**, directed by Woody Allen; screenplay by Mr. Allen and Marshall Brickman; produced by Charles H. Joffe; executive producer, Robert Greenhut; director of photography, Gordon Willis; music, Ralph Rosenblum; distributed by United Artists. Running time: 94 minutes. At the Baromet Theater, Third Avenue near 59th Street; Little Carnegie Theater, 57th Street east of Seventh Avenue; and 34th Street East Theater, 34th Street near Second Avenue. This film has been rated PG.

Alvy Singer	Woody Allen
Annie Hall	Diane Keaton
Rob	Tony Roberts
Alison	Carol Kane
Tony Lacey	Paul Simon
Mom Hall	Colleen Dewhurst
Pam	Shelley Duvall
Robin	Janet Margolin
Duane Hall	Christopher Walken
Dad Hall	Donald Symington
Grammy Hall	Helen Ludlam
Alvy's Dad	Mordecai Lerner
Alvy's Mom	Joan Newman
Alvy, age 9	Jonathan Munk
Alvy's Aunt	Ruth Volner
Alvy's Uncle	Martin Rosenblatt
Joey Nichols	Hy Ansel
Aunt Tessie	Rachel Novikoff
Man in theater line	Russell Horton
Marshall McLuhan	Himself
Donnie	Christine Jones
Miss Reed	Mary Boylan
Janet	Wendy Gerard
Coke Friend	John Doumanian

As Annie Hall, Miss Keaton emerges as Woody Allen's Liv Ullmann. His camera finds beauty and emotional resources that somehow escape the notice of other directors. Her Annie Hall is a marvelous nut, a talented singer (which Woody demonstrates in a nightclub sequence that has the effect of a love scene), generous, shy, insecure and so uncertain about sex that she needs a stick of marijuana before going to bed.

Alvy, on the other hand, embraces sex as if it were something that wouldn't keep, even when it means going to bed with a dopey reporter from Rolling Stone (Shelley Duvall in a tiny role). The most Alvy can do to meet Annie's fears is to buy a red light-bulb for the bedroom lamp. He thinks it's sexy.

"Annie Hall" moves back and forth in time according to Alvy's recollections, from his meeting with Annie on a tennis court, to scenes of his childhood, to a disastrous visit with her family in Chippewa Falls, to trips to Hollywood and scenes of reconciliations and partings in New York. Throughout there are explosively comic set-pieces having to do with analysis, Hollywood, politics, you-name-it, but the mood, ultimately, is somber, thoughtful, reflective.

One of Mr. Allen's talents as a director is his casting, and "Annie Hall" contains more fine supporting performances than any other American film this year, with the possible exception of "The Late Show" and "Three Women." Most prominent are Paul Simon as a recording industry promoter, Carol Kane as Alvy's politically committed first wife, Tony Roberts as Alvy's actor-friend, Colleen Dewhurst as Annie Hall's mother, and Christopher Walken as Annie's quietly suicidal brother. That's to name only a few.

There will be discussion about what points in the film coincide with the lives of its two stars, but this, I think, is to detract from and trivialize the achievement of the film, which, at last, puts Woody in the league with the best directors we have.

"Annie Hall," which has been rated PG ("Parental Guidance Suggested"), contains some mildly explicit sex scenes, which, since sex is one of the things it's all about, could have been avoided only if it were a different film.